

This [Wall Street Journal editorial](#) by Peggy Noonan (Friday April 15 2022):

America's Most Tumultuous Holy Week

On Palm Sunday, Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant. Lincoln was dead by Easter

It was the Easter of epochal events. All that Holy Week history came like a barrage. It was April 1865, the Civil War. No one touched by that war ever got over it; it was the signal historical event of their lives, the greatest national trauma in U.S. history. It would claim 750,000 lives. Everyone knew the South would fight to the end, but suddenly people wondered if it was the end. Gen. Robert E. Lee's army was trapped and under siege in the middle of Virginia. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant was bearing down, his army going from strength to strength.

The two exchanged letters under flag of truce. Grant to Lee: Did the general not see the "hopelessness" of his position? Lee sent a roundabout response, Grant a roundabout reply, but he was starting to see: Lee knows he is beat. On the morning of April 9, Palm Sunday, Lee sent word: He would discuss terms of surrender. They met that afternoon in the Appomattox home of Wilmer McLean.

Lee got there first. Allen C. Guelzo, in his masterly "Robert E. Lee: A Life," quotes a reporter from the New York Herald who had joined a crowd outside. He was bowled over by the bearing of the imposing Lee, in full dress uniform with "an elegant sword, sash and gauntlets." In truth, Lee didn't know what to expect. He'd told his staff, "If I am to be General Grant's prisoner to-day, I intend to make my best appearance." His close friend Gen. James Longstreet thought Lee's fine dress a form of "emotional armor," an attempt to conceal "profound depression," according to Ron Chernow's superb, compendious "Grant."

Grant, who at 42 was 16 years Lee's junior, arrived a picture of dishevelment—slouched hat, common soldier's blouse, mud-splashed boots. He was painfully aware of how he looked and feared Lee would think him deliberately discourteous, Mr. Chernow writes. Later, historians would think he was making a political statement, but he'd simply outrun his supply lines: his dress uniform was in a trunk on a wagon somewhere. But he projected authority. Joshua Chamberlain, hero of Gettysburg, wrote that he saw Grant trot by, "sitting his saddle with the ease of a born master. . . . He seemed greater than I had ever seen him,—a look as of another world around him."

The armies of the North and South, in blue and gray, were massed uneasily beyond the house. Neither Lee nor Grant wanted them to resume the fight. Some of Lee's officers had urged him not to surrender but to disband his army and let his men scatter to the hills and commence a guerrilla war. Lee had refused. The entire country would devolve into "lawless bands in every part," he wrote, and "a state of society would ensue from which it would take the country years to recover."

The generals sat in McLean's parlor and attempted conversation. But of course it is the surrender agreement, on whose terms they quickly agreed, that will be remembered forever. Lee's army would surrender and receive parole; weapons and supplies would be turned over as captured property. Officers would be allowed to keep their personal sidearms.

Lee suggested Confederate soldiers be allowed to take home a horse or mule for "planting a spring crop," Mr. Guelzo writes. Grant agreed, and Lee was overcome with relief. Lee then asked Grant for food for his troops. They had been living for 10 days on parched corn. Grant agreed again and asked how many rations were needed. "About 25,000," Lee said. Grant's commissary chief later asked, "Were such terms ever before given by a conqueror to a defeated foe?"

Grant asked his aide Ely Parker, an American Indian of the Seneca tribe, to make a fair copy of the surrender agreement. When Lee ventured, "I am glad to see one real American here." Parker memorably replied, "We are all Americans."

Grant would write in his memoirs "What General Lee's feelings were I do not know." His own feelings, which had earlier been jubilant, were now "sad and depressed." He couldn't rejoice at the downfall of a foe that had "suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse." Now the door to the parlor was opened, and Grant's officers were introduced to Lee, including "a newly minted captain, Robert Todd Lincoln, the twenty-one-year-old son of the president," Mr. Guelzo writes.

Grant and Lee shook hands; Lee stepped onto the porch and signaled his orderly for his horse. An Illinois cavalry officer, George Forsyth, remembered every Union officer on the porch "sprang to his feet . . . every hand . . . raised in military salute." Lee looked to the east, where his army was in its last encampment. As he turned to leave, Grant came out to the steps and saluted him by raising his hat.

Lee reciprocated and rode off slowly to break the news to the men he'd commanded. Mr. Guelzo: "He spoke briefly and simply, as to a theater company after its last curtain."

They had done their duty, Lee said: "Leave the result to God. Go to your homes and resume your occupations. Obey the laws and become as good citizens as you were soldiers." Grant had something Lee didn't have. Lee couldn't act under instructions of his government because it had effectively collapsed when Richmond fell. Events had moved too quickly for Grant to receive specific instruction from Washington, but he knew the president's mind. In the last year of the war he and Lincoln had become good friends, and in their conversations Grant had been struck by the president's "generous and kindly spirit toward the Southern people" and the absence of any "vengeful disposition."

Days before the surrender Lincoln had visited Grant's headquarters at City Point, Va. The president spent a day at a field hospital, where in "a tender spirit of reconciliation" he "shook hands with wounded confederates," in Mr. Chernow's words. A Northern colonel who described Lincoln as "the ugliest man I ever put my eyes on," with an "expression of plebeian vulgarity in his face," spoke with him and found "a very honest and kindly man" who was "highly intellectual." The mercy shown at Appomattox is a kind of golden moment in American history, but history's barrage didn't stop. America exploded with excitement at the end of the war, and all Washington was lit with lights, flags, bunting.

On Good Friday, April 14, Lincoln met with his son Robert to hear of what he saw at Appomattox, and then with his cabinet, including Gen. Grant, where he happily backed up Grant's generosity. Grant, he said, had operated fully within his wishes. Lincoln was assassinated that night, died Saturday morning, and for a long time the next day would be called "black Easter."

But what is the meaning of Appomattox? What explains the wisdom and mercy shown? How does a nation do that, produce it?

As you see these past weeks, I have been back to my history books. You learn a lot that way, not only about the country and the world and "man," but even yourself. Would you have let your enemy go home in dignity, with the horses and guns? And not bring the law down on their heads? And the answer—what does that tell you about you?